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Do male undergraduates write more argumentatively?

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Abstract

Research on linguistic variation across gender has focused mainly on oral language. However, second language (L2) writing research has begun to explore gender as an important variable in the socio-cultural context of writers in the last few decades. This paper aimed to explain how gender identity in relation to L2 writing is viewed as multiple and dynamic rather than as predictable or universal in modern social constructionist understandings. It contrasts this view with three traditional fixed notions of gender: a) the male dominance framework, b) the female deficit approach, and c) the male-female dual culture model. We also aimed to illustrate how a group of male and female undergraduate students of English as a foreign language varied in their written position statements on the controversial topic of euthanasia. Around 100 third-year undergraduate EFL learners consented to write 100-200 word argumentative pieces on the topic in 2010. Quantitative lexico-grammatical analyses of their performance and the qualitative discourse analysis of the position statements across genders revealed significant gender differences in terms of tokens, number of word types, type-token ratio, average word length, number of sentence, lexical complexity, lexical sophistication as well as in general rhetorical organization. Results of the study showed that female learners wrote less assertively and less argumentatively than male learners using more obscure positions. Unlike some previous studies that reported no differences, the findings illustrated how learners' social contexts and limitations may be reflected in their approach to writing in English as a foreign language.

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Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).*Keywords:* Argumentative writing, L2 writing, EFL writing, gender differences, learner corpus

1. Introduction

The recent literature on L2 writing suggests that writing researchers and teachers can expect male and female writers to write differently even in formal academic contexts and produce texts with different linguistic features. Female and male differences in experiences related to language learning and use are different and are not universal. Determined by types of social contexts and writing tasks among other things, these differences might affect the way texts are written. L2 writing research has recently started examining gender in the cultural context of the student writer and has tried to broaden fixed notions of gender to include social constructionist understandings. This view in L2 writing considers gender as constructed within the social use of language and rejects gendered language as predictable or universal (Kubota, 2003). In other words, Research on gender in the socio-cultural context of L2

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learning in general and of L2 writing in particular has moved forward from the early stage of a fixed binary conceptualization of this variable to a more advanced stage of a dynamic and social constructivist view.

In its social constructionist conceptualization, gender is not something that we are and it is not something that we have. Instead, it is something that we do (West and Zimmerman, 1987). It is social rather than biological. Therefore, it finds its way into all social activities that we do including L2 academic writing (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Sex and sexual orientations are no longer viewed as dichotomous either. Blackburn (2005) draws on his “firsthand experiences with queer youth [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning] to illustrate the significance of understanding gender and sexual identities in complicated ways in order to meet the needs of queer students as well as all students who are confined by dichotomous, heterosexist, and homophobic understandings of gender” (p. 398).

Major changes in research approaches and trends that have investigated gender in second language acquisition and in L2 writing have been summarized by Kubota’s (2003) in four approaches to gender and language. The male dominance framework stresses social domination and power of men over women in social interaction. The deficit approach emphasizes negative aspects of women’s language and regards male language as the norm. The dual culture model highlights the different communicative styles of boys and girls. And finally, the social constructionist view sees gender as constructed in the social use of language and reject gendered language as predictable or universal (see also Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). Whereas the first three approaches view gender as dichotomous implying one-to-one relations between gender and language, the fourth sees gender as dynamic and socially constructed implying no universally applicable gender differences. This current view can have many implications for L2 writing research and instruction. One important implication is that people construct and convey their gendered identities through L2 writing differently in different contexts. In learning English as foreign language (EFL), the unexplored issues of the amounts and types of in-class gender-related interactions, the out-of-class gender-related limitations, different perceptions of gender, and different expressions of stance and identity might be viewed as significant factors in relation to the design and implementation of EFL academic writing instruction in different contexts (Bidlake, 2007).

2. The study

This study aimed to gain insights into how male and female undergraduate learners compared in their argumentative writing in English and to contribute to the understanding of gender differences in L2 writing. The purpose was to compare the quality, rhetorical organization, and selected lexico-grammatical features of argumentative texts written by male and female learners using discourse and corpus analysis techniques. More specifically, these main research questions guided the study:

Are there any statistically significant differences between the mean scores of male and female undergraduate EFL writers’ performance on an argumentative task in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use, mechanics, and overall quality?

What are the differences between the argumentative texts produced by male and female undergraduate EFL learners in terms of overall organization and how do they express stance in argumentative texts?

2.1. Participants

The study was carried out on argumentative written texts produced by 98 male and female third-year undergraduate EFL learners, aged 20-23. The participants were studying for a BA degree in English Language and Literature in central Iran in 2010. All the learners consented to write a 100-200 word argumentative paragraph in English for analysis by the researchers. This sample was a convenient sample of 24 male and 74 female learners from three undergraduate content area classes. The participants’ were given 30 minutes to complete the task of writing a paragraph on their agreement or disagreement with euthanasia under classroom exam conditions. They were not allowed to use dictionaries but could write as many drafts as they wished during their time limit. Few participants completed more than one full draft and only their final version was collected for analysis. The

background literacy experiences of the group included basic literacy education in their mother tongue, Persian, and EFL literacy education at the university. Their mother tongue literacy experiences included learning to read and write without any systematic education in academic writing apart from the learning of the basic rules of correct writing. Their formal EFL writing experiences included education in academic paragraph writing and essay writing in the first two years of their undergraduate studies. None had attended different writing classes or private language schools. Their mean level of English proficiency based on the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery was 64.8 out of 100 (range= 38-88, SD= 11.2) and there was no statistically significant difference between mean proficiency scores for male (68.42) and female (63.61) participants ($df=96$, $t= 1.84$, $p<0.5$). All participants had studied the same EFL writing textbooks with the same lecturers in their last two years of study and had been instructed on the principles of organizing and developing the introduction, body, and conclusion of formal academic paragraphs and longer essays with different rhetorical patterns such as cause-effect, comparison-contrast, description, definition, chronology, etc.

2.2. Procedures

The 98 handwritten texts on agreement or disagreement with euthanasia were photocopied to provide two sets of the same documents for independent scoring by two male EFL experts. The raters assigned independent scores to the collected samples in the five dimensions of content (30 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (5 points) based on the ESL Composition profile (Jabobs, Zinkgraf, Hartfiel & Hughey, 1981). The mean score on each dimension was considered in the final analyses. The inter-rater reliability indices for the scores on the dimensions of writing quality were all significant at the 0.05 level and were above 0.75 (Content=0.88, Organization=0.84, Vocabulary=0.78, Language use=0.84, Mechanics=0.75, Total writing score=0.91). The two experts also coded the participants' texts for the presence and location of the position statements. They agreed on the coding of the location of position statements and supporting details in 90 percent of the cases and discussed ambiguities in a follow-up meeting for a final decision.

3. Findings

3.1. Male-female differences in writing quality and lexical features of writing

The mean writing quality scores achieved by male EFL writers were higher than those by female learners on all of the dimensions of the ESL composition profile as summarized in Table 1. These differences were statistically significant only in the dimensions of content and organization. In other words, male EFL learners wrote texts that were rated significantly higher in terms of content and organization than those written by female learners.

Table 1: Mean scores on texts by male and female EFL learners*

Dimension	Gender	Mean	SD	SEM	t- value	Sig
Content	Male	18.81	2.60	.53	2.035	.045
	Female	17.39	3.10	.36		
Organization	Male	15.33	1.91	.39	2.083	.043
	Female	13.90	2.49	.29		
Vocabulary	Male	13.02	1.78	.36	.559	.577
	Female	12.72	2.40	.28		
Language Use	Male	16.89	2.43	.49	1.608	.111
	Female	15.73	3.20	.37		
Mechanics	Male	3.25	.68	.14	.782	.436
	Female	3.14	.59	.06		
Total score	Male	66.29	8.20	1.67	1.456	.149
	Female	62.88	10.48	1.22		

*(Male=24, Female=74, $df=96$)

3.2. Male-female differences in text organization

The quantitative comparison of organizational aspects of the texts written by male and female learners summarized in Table 1 revealed significant differences in favor of men. For further insights, the presence and location of the position statements either for or against euthanasia as an indicator of argumentative text organization was qualitatively examined across texts produced by male and female learners. This main idea was coded as Initial (stated in the introduction), Medial (stated in the body), Final (stated in the conclusion), or Obscure (not clearly stated) following the guidelines offered by Hirose (2003, : 190) and Kubota (1998). Deductive overall organization where the position expressed in the text preceded supporting reasons and inductive overall organization where reasons preceded the main opinion were also identified and independently coded for each text following the example of the same two researchers. This data has been summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Organizational patterns in arguments written by male and female EFL learners*

Organizational variables	Options	Male Learners	Female Learners
Location of main idea	Text-initial position	11 (45.8%)	31(41.9%)
	Text-medial position	3(12.5%)	9(12.2%)
	Text-final position	10 (41.7%)	26 (35.2%)
	Obscure position	0	8(10.9%)
Overall organization	Deductive overall organization	13(54.2%)	55(74.4%)
	Inductive overall organization	11(45.8%)	19(25.6%)
Position	Agree with euthanasia	11(45.8%)	16 (21.5%)
	Disagree with euthanasia	13(54.2%)	50 (67.6%)
	No clear position	0	8 (10.9%)

*(Male=24, Female=74)

Few participants (12.5% of the men and 12.2% of the women) placed their position statements in the text-medial position. In other words, the position statement was very often placed either at the beginning or the end of the paragraph (Table 3). An interesting finding was that while all men clearly expressed for or against positions on euthanasia, eight women (almost 11%) did not write any clear position statements. As understood by the two independent expert coders, most female students (74.4%) used deductive overall organization in their texts based on the position of supporting statements in relation to the main claim. Females either placed a clear position statement before their supporting ideas or started with vague general statements and obscure positions and ended up with more specific supports. Male learners, on the other hand, used both kinds of deductive and inductive organizations with roughly the same frequency and always expressed for or against position statements to support (Table 3).

4. Conclusion

The finding that female learners are weaker in content and organization scores and tend to be less assertive and less argumentative supports Lakoff's (1977) contention that there are gender-specific discourse techniques shaped from childhood. From childhood, many Iranian women learn that they are expected to be less talkative, less argumentative, and less assertive, Clarke (1994) used his findings on male graduates' assertiveness and argumentativeness (as opposed to females' conciliatory voice) to explain why fewer women had achieved first-class degrees from Oxford and Cambridge. The similar findings of this study can be used to partially explain why professions in Iran especially those involving greater degrees of argumentation and assertion (e.g. judges, MPs, professors, etc.) are strongly male-dominated. Through this article, we hope to have shown how certain linguistic devices have been employed for writing arguments by a less represented population of male and female learners of English. We hope to have contributed research insights into the characteristics of male and female argumentation.

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